

THE FORMER U.S. COAST GUARD
LIFEBOAT RESCUE STATION AND LOOKOUT TOWER
POINT ARGUELLO, CALIFORNIA
(1936 - 1941)
A PUBLIC REPORT

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PUBLIC REPORT

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In 1978, the former U.S. Coast Guard Lifeboat Rescue Station and Lookout Tower of Point Arguello, California, was recommended for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places. Eligibility for inclusion into the National Register was based upon the architectural significance of the station building and of the engineering importance of its Marine Railroad. The study to determine the historical significance of the complex was commissioned by the Department of the Air Force, Headquarters Space and Missile Organization (SAMSO), in Los Angeles, because it was contemplated that the Boathouse, Dock Launching Ramp and Marine Railroad would have to be removed to accommodate a required marine facility to support Space Shuttle launches from Vandenberg Air Force Base. Coordination of the study was accomplished through Interagency Archeological Services, Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service (IAS-HCRS)

In order to minimize the adverse effects from planned Space Shuttle operations on this historical complex, the Department of the Air Force's Headquarters Space and Missile Systems Organization (SAMSO), now space Division (SD), commissioned a detailed Historic American Engineering Record (HAER) report on the Boathouse and the following general report for the public. The HAER drawings were prepared by Ron Johnson and Albert Borgo. The buildings of the facility were carefully recorded in photographs by the Los Angeles architectural photographer Marvin Rand. The historian of American Technology, Professor Carroll Pursell of the University of California, Santa Barbara, was consulted during the study, as were several staff members of the National Maritime Museum in San Francisco. The study of the history of the Point Arguello Station was carried out by David Bricker and David Gebhard, in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Lompoc, and Washington, D.C., at the National Archives and the National Records Center.

A number of individuals were of appreciable help in preparing this study. Mention should be made of the following: Mrs. Earl Calvert; James Dillon; Francis Guest, O.F.M.; Larry McManis; Terry Matchette; R.A. Miller; Richard E. Oglesby; R.A. Pyros; R.L. Scheina; and Lt. Cmdr. Thompson.

Additional copies of this report can be obtained from the National Technical Information Service (NTIS) as Appendix A of SD-TR-80-7, Case Study Report - Impact of Space Shuttle Activities on the Point Arguello Boathouse, Tetra Tech Inc., 630 North Rosemead Boulevard, Pasadena, California 91102, January 1980, or from the HQ Space Division, Directorate of Civil Engineering (DE), P.O. Box 92960 Worldway Postal Center, Los Angeles, CA. 90009.

David Gebnard
University of California
March 28, 1980

The Historic Background of Lifeboat Stations in the United States

Before 1940 the principal means for rescuing mariners and others from shipwrecks on the American coast were the stationing of Coast Guard cutters at numerous ports, and the establishment of manned lifeboat rescue stations situated at points on the coast where shipwrecks had often occurred. Today the Coast Guard still relies on cutters to aid in rescue, but the manned rescue stations have increasingly been replaced by helicopter and other types of airplanes. Many of these Coast Guard rescue stations have been converted to other uses, while a number have been abandoned over the past twenty-five years. One of these stations, which has not been in active use since 1942 is the U.S. Coast Guard Lifeboat Rescue Station and Lookout Tower at Point Arguello, California. This facility, built between 1936 and 1940, was one of the last of these stations to be built. The history of this station provides a fascinating glimpse not only into its specific use and architecture, but as a summation of a hundred plus years of the construction and operation of such facilities along the Atlantic, Pacific and Gulf coasts, and several of the country's inland waterways.

The background of the Point Arguello Station takes us back to 1807 when the private Massachusetts Humane Society established America's first station at Cohasset. Before this date the Society had built a number of small wooden buildings along the Massachusetts coast which provided some

In 1847, a small sum of five thousand dollars was appropriated by Congress furnish some minimal rescue equipment for already established lighthouses. After several shipwrecks along the coast in the late 1840's, Federal funds were authorized to establish twenty-two stations on the coast of New Jersey and Long Island. The first of these governmental stations was built at Spmaceti Cove, near Sandy Hook on the New Jersey coast (1848). At first these stations were manned by extemporized crews. Later, superintendents, keepers and crews were permanently hired.

While the small rescue stations did indeed provide help for a number of shipwrecks they were obviously not adequate for the task. In 1871, Sumner I. Kimball was appointed the Head of the Revenue Marine Bureau of the Treasury Department which administered the stations, and it was his goal to guard "... the entire coast of the nation through the planting of a chain of fortresses to be garrisoned by disciplined conquerors of the sea." (Harper's New Monthly Magazine, February, 1882). As a result of Kimball's activities the Life-Saving Service was set up as a regular unit of the Treasury Department, and a Board of Life-Saving Appliances was formed. This new Board sifted through the hundreds of new inventions for life-saving devices which were being developed in what was certainly one of the most inventive periods in the history of technology.

Substantial Congressional appropriations had been made in 1874 and later, so that by 1892 there were one hundred and seventy-nine stations. Of these, one hundred and thirty-nine were situated on the Atlantic and Gulf coasts, thirty-four on the Great Lakes and six on the Pacific coast. With the added funding available, the individual stations began to assume a set form consisting of a boathouse (usually large enough to house two to three rescue boats), an accompanying dock and launching platform, a lookout tower, a barracks, and often, a separate keeper's or officer's quarters.



1. Life-Saving Station on Lake Michigan (from: Harper's Monthly,
Vol. 64, February, 1882.)

Stations were slowly added in the 1890's and early 1900's; by 1915 the number had grown to two hundred and eighty. In that year a law was enacted to consolidate the Life-Saving Service and the Revenue-cutter Service under a separate branch named the Coast Guard. In 1919, the Coast Guard was returned to the Treasury Department. As part of this reorganization the Coast Guard was authorized to establish ten "aviation stations," and the importance of air rescue gradually increased until it essentially came to supplant the traditional boat-oriented rescue stations. Thus by 1930, through consolidation and the addition of a few new stations, the number had decreased to two hundred and seventy-six rescue stations along the coastline of the continental United States, supplemented by one in Alaska and one on the Ohio River. During World War II, all of the coastal rescue stations were integrated into the coastal defense system. After 1945, a number of the lifeboat rescue stations were deactivated or they were no longer involved in lifeboat rescue operations. By the late 1970's, most of the lifeboat rescue stations remaining under the jurisdiction of the Coast Guard were being used for other purposes.

The first of the rescue stations on the West coast were built at the end of the 1870's and they were a result of the expansion of the Service under the direction of Sumner I. Kimball. In the late summer of 1878, the Golden Gate Park Station in San Francisco became the first lifeboat station built on the Pacific coast. This was followed late that year by the station at Humboldt Bay on the northern California coast. In 1881, on Bolinas Bay near Point Reyes, a third life-saving station was established. This station, which burned in 1885, was subsequently relocated and rebuilt in 1915. The principal concentration of these stations was, as one would expect, in and around the entrance to the Golden Gate and Francisco Bay. The 1878

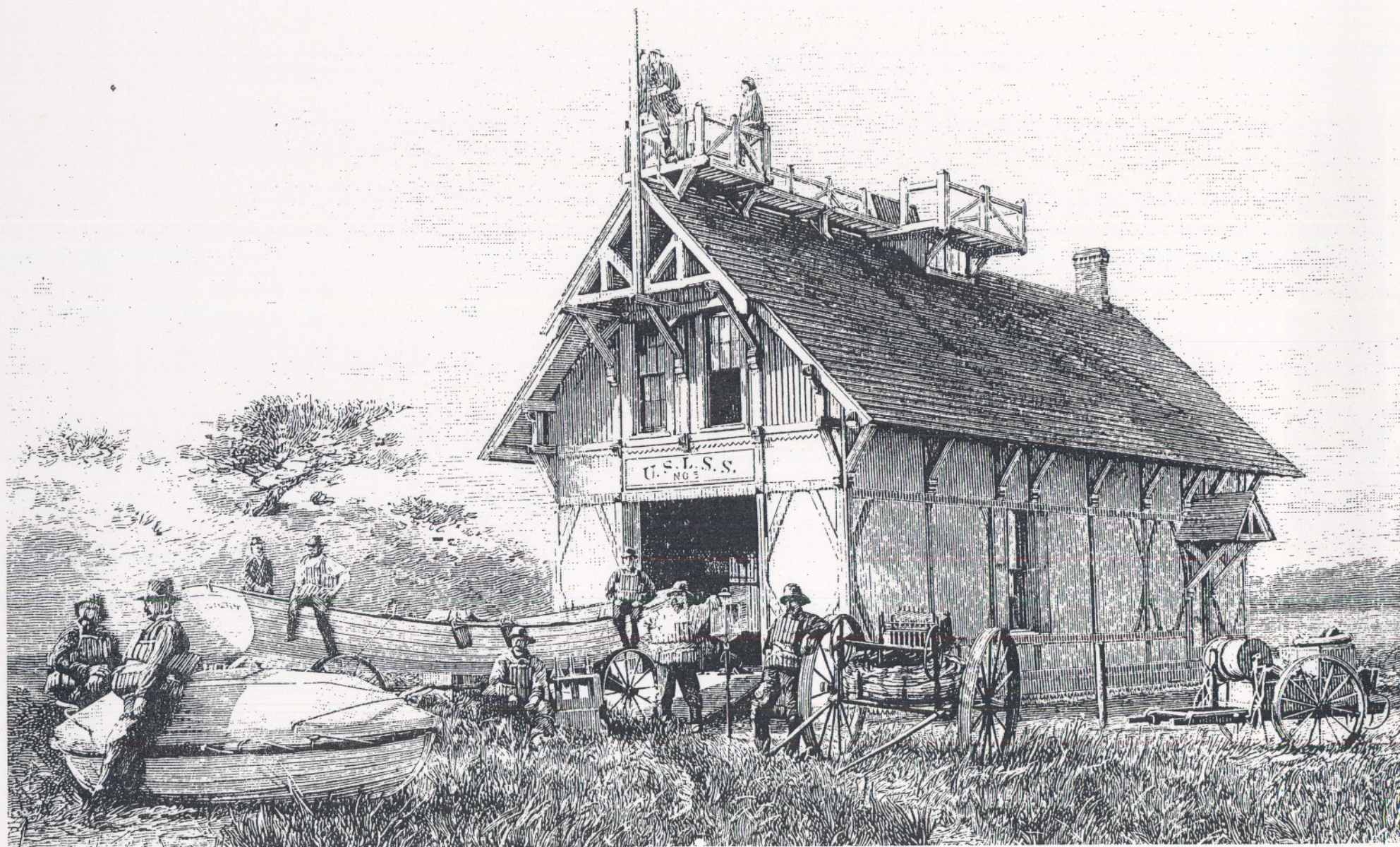
Golden Gate Park Station was joined in 1889 by two new Rescue Stations, Fort Point on the south side of the Golden Gate, and Point Bonito in Marin County, north and west of the Gate. In 1894, these three San Francisco stations were augmented by the Southside Station situated on San Francisco's south beach near Fort Funston.

Further up the northern California coast two additional rescue stations were built. These were the Point Reyes Station (1889) and the Arena Cove Station (1906) just north of Point Arena. The original 1889 Point Reyes Station was located right on the coast, two miles north of the lighthouse, and from the beginning it was difficult to launch the surfboats into the turbulent sea. In 1915, a boathouse was built for the station at Drakes Bay, but this location had its own problems due to the continual silting up of the entrance to the Bay. The last of the rescue stations to be built in California, and the only one situated on the southern coast was that built at Point Arguello (1936-41).

The Design of the Lifeboat Rescue Stations in the United States

The replacement of lifeboats by helicopters and aircraft is part of the long tradition of introducing the latest in technology to the rescue stations. The Board on Life-Saving Appliances, established in 1878, progressively encouraged and accepted for use a wide array of new technology. Horses were introduced in 1880 to help launch and retrieve the boats; telephones came into use in 1884. At some of the earliest stations the open lifeboats were carried and pulled by hand to the water and then launched. With the introduction of larger boats and the desire for greater speed in reaching the water, provision was made for two- or four-wheel carriages pulled either by hand or by horses. In an article published in 1884 in The American Architect and Building News, it was noted that "On the coast of Maine...and on the Pacific coast, as well as on the piers of the lake harbors, the self-righting and self-bailing lifeboat is in general use, and as it is very heavy, the stations are constructed with reference to it, being provided with an inclined plane furnished by rollers, on which the boat rests, and is let into the water by machinery."

The precise year that the Marine Railway was first used in a Coast Guard rescue station is presently unknown. The written histories of these facilities and early historic photographs would indicate that Marine Railways were in use by the end of the 1880's. It would appear that the "machinery" which was occasionally mentioned in their early accounts referred to hand operated winches, cranes,



2. Life-Saving Station on the East Coast (from: Harper's Monthly, Vol. 64, February, 1882).

for launching lifeboats. Several different types of iron and later steel railroad trackages were employed for these Marine Railroads. All of the early ones employed a single pair of tracks for one or more of the boat carriages. By the early 1880's (and perhaps even before) a conventional hand operated railroad switching apparatus was introduced, so that the tracks for two or three boat carriages could converge on the dock, and then one or more tracks would descend on the ramp into the water. This system had the advantage that the launching ramp itself could be narrow, with only the one pair of tracks entering the water. But it posed problems, for the switching mechanism was often corroded by its continual exposure to salt water, and delays were often experienced in the launching of the lifeboats. Around 1910-1912, the rescue stations began to use the double or triple rail system which has continued to be employed down to the present. In this system the rails still converge after leaving the boathouse, but the two or three sets of rails, placed side by side, continue down the launching ramp. No switching is necessary and the launching ramp could still remain narrow as it entered the water.

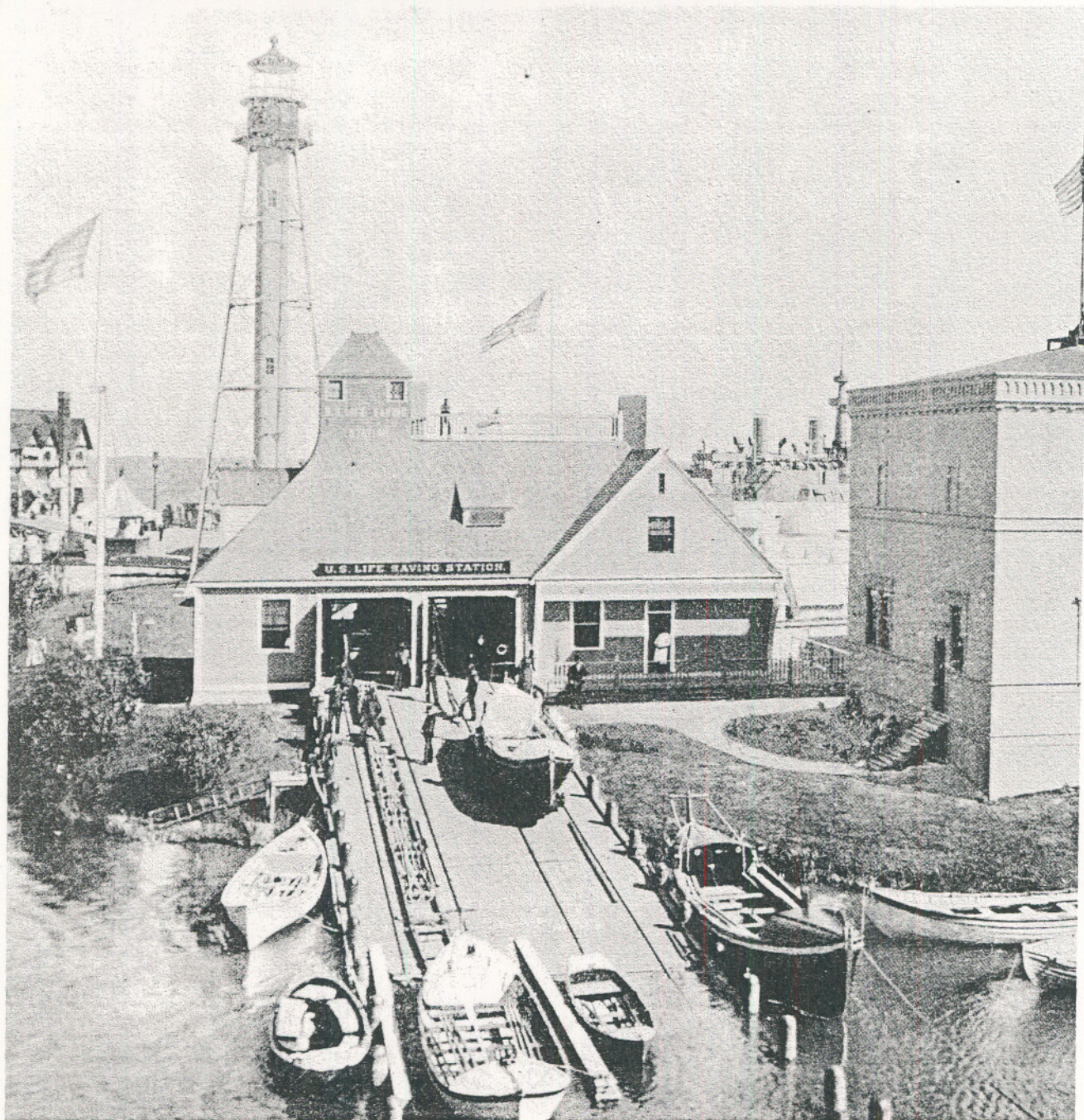
The list of inventive devices to assist in rescue operations which were adopted over the years is impressive, ranging from self-righting lifeboats, to life-saving cars, to Breeches Buoys, to the Lyle Gun (for shooting off cable to distressed ships). By 1930 all of the stations were equipped with self-bailing and self-righting motor lifeboats, self bailing motor surfboats, plus the latest in radio apparatus. While almost all of the stations were connected to public electric lines, they were often equipped with their own emergency gasoline-powered electric systems. The motors to launch the lifeboats were almost always independent gasoline driven winches. In this way there would never be a lack of power to maintain the lights or

to launch the large motor lifeboats on their Marine Railways.

The first buildings constructed for the Life-Saving Service were simple utilitarian structures visually suggesting the outbuildings which might be found accompanying any farm or urban residence. The first of the rescue facilities, constructed in 1848 at Spermaceti Cove, near Sandy Hook, New Jersey, was a wood-framed, shingled building measuring only sixteen by twenty-eight feet. Beginning in the 1870's the structures provided at the rescue facilities were enlarged, and began to assume some architectural pretenses. With a few exceptions, all of the facilities built between the 1870's and the 1930's borrowed their visual imagery from domestic architecture. The complex of buildings at each rescue facility generally conveyed the impression of an upper-middle-class suburban home or a service building for an extensive estate. Yet, the addition of such features as a tall tower with clock faces or observation platforms on the roof implied a public rather than a private use. The early stations were described in 1882 as "...snug two-story buildings...with small open observatory or lookout deck at the peak of the roof. The first floor contains the boatroom, where the apparatus is stored, and a second smaller apartment, which is the living room of the crew. In the second story are three or four rooms; one is appropriated to the lighter apparatus, the medicine chest, the library, official books and papers: two rooms are furnished with cot beds as sleeping apartments for the keeper and the crew; and one small room is set aside for the signal officer..." In the larger installations, the boathouses contained as many as three boats, providing high loft space with vertical winches to lift the boats from their rail cars. These boathouses were located either on land at the water's edge or placed on piles over the water as part of the dock and launching ramps. The lookout towers were sometimes

labeled as "...of the pointed order of architecture..." which meant that they were in the Victorian Eastlake Style (or Stick Style). The Eastlake Style had come into fashion on the American scene in the early 1870's. It was in part inspired by the furniture and interior designs of the English architect Charles Eastlake, which had become well known in America through his book, Hints on Household Taste, which was first published in 1868. This style was essentially a domestic style realized almost exclusively in wood frame buildings. Although not really Medieval, the Eastlake Style emphasized verticality so that its flavor was Gothic. The high pitched roofs, tall chimneys and occasional towers created an informal and highly picturesque form. As illustrated in the article "American Life-Saving Service," in Harper's New Monthly Magazine, February, 1882, the exterior walls of these Eastlake styled rescue stations were divided into panels by vertical, horizontal and diagonal timbering which suggested English Medieval half-timbering. The roofs were usually projected far out at both the gable and eave ends, and the projecting portions of the roof were supported by numerous brackets and struts. Except for the outlook platform on the roof this rescue station could easily be mistaken for a small Eastlake cottage, or perhaps a carriage-house for an upper-middle-class estate.

From the beginning these Eastlake styled rescue stations were also affected by a slowly developing nostalgia for America's pre-1800 past. Elements of Colonial architecture began to appear in these buildings, even before they received the official stamp of stylistic approval of the Centennial of 1876. Clapboard and ship lap sheathing, double hung, small

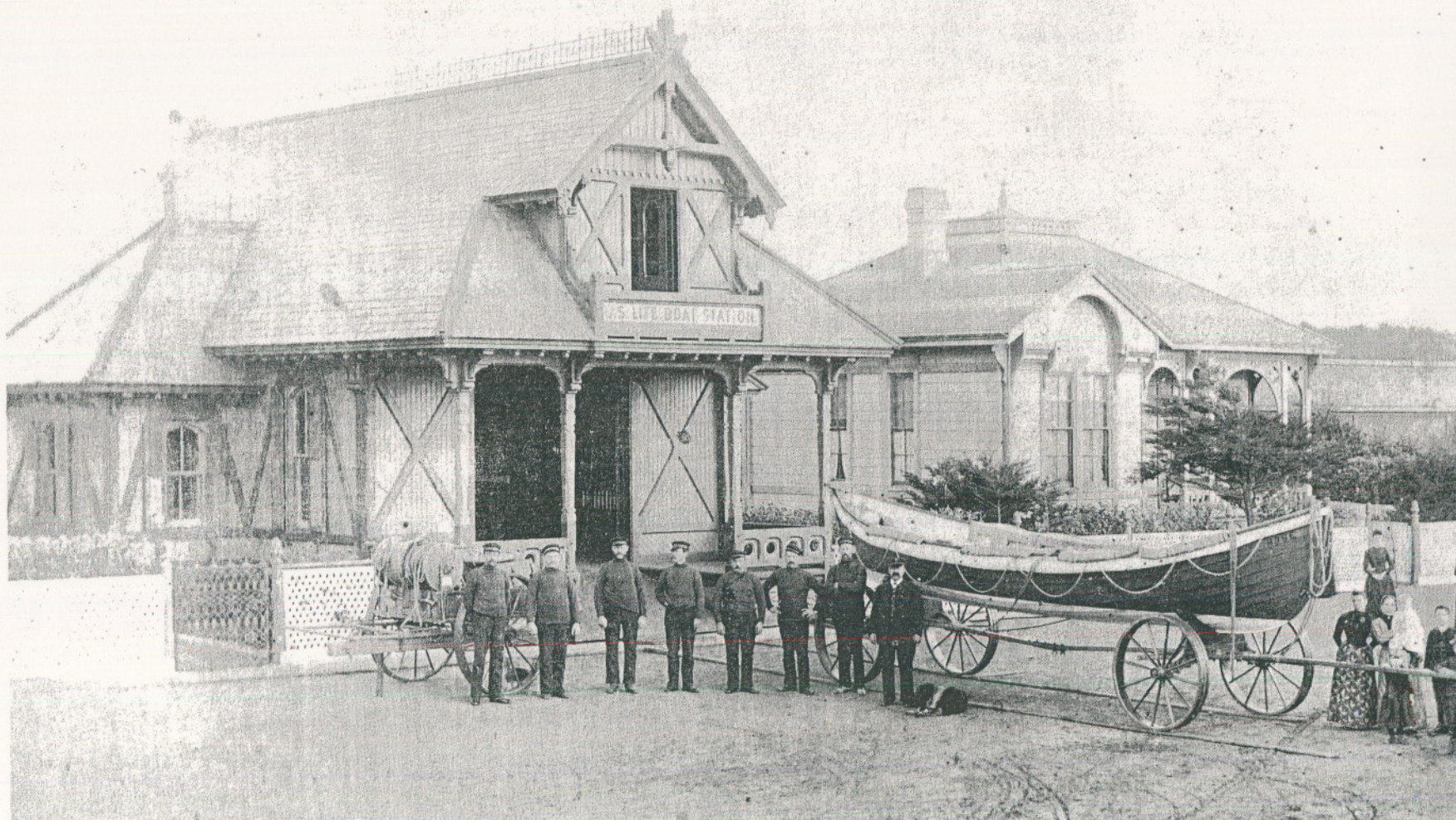


3. U.S. Life-Saving Station, World Columbian Exposition, 1893, Chicago (from: The Wonders of the World's Fair, Chicago, W.B. Conkey Col., 1894, Pt. 2).

paned windows with accompanying shutters, and occasional eighteenth century classical detailing crept into many Eastlake buildings. In the 1880's the Eastlake design elements tended to disappear and they were replaced by a mixture of the Colonial Revival and the Victorian Queen Anne. The larger, more elaborate rescue stations sprouted conical roofed towers and turrets, projecting bays and elaborate spindle and sawed work--all of which were a hallmark of the exuberant American version of the Queen Anne Revival Style.

But regardless of style, the design of the buildings for the lifeboat rescue stations tended to look the puritanical and nautical qualities which were then and now associated with the rigors of the Cape and of coastal New England. From the 1890's on, the lifeboat rescue stations adopted the New England version of the Colonial Revival--simple wood framed, clapboard or shingle sheathed buildings covered by gable or Dutch gambrel roofs. Minimal stylistic elaboration was confined to the exterior; internally the undecorated bare plaster walls and simple woodwork suggested the nautical flavor of a ship's interior. In several of the last-to-be-built lifeboat rescue stations such as that on the Ohio River at Cleveland (1940), the ship's image was maintained, even though the ship was now streamlined and aerodynamic in design.

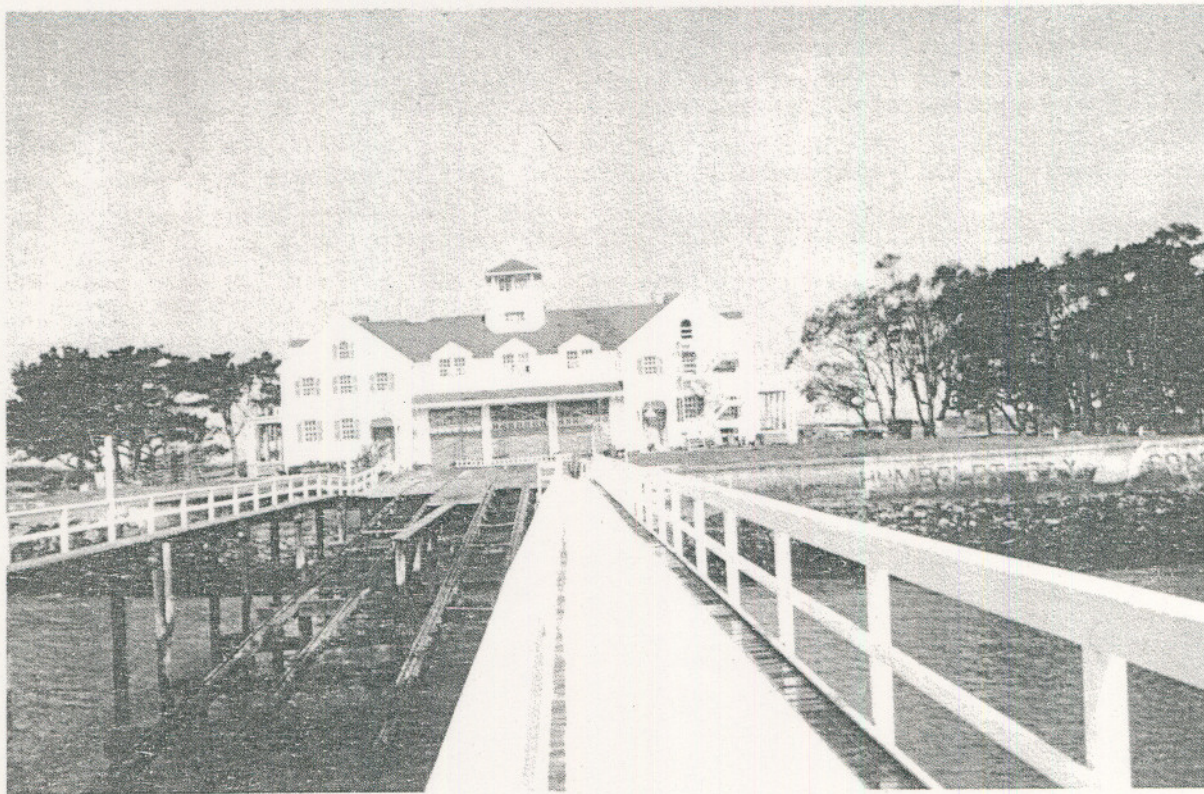
Architecturally, the California stations reflect all of these changes in fashion which came about from the late 1870's through the mid-1930's. The first stations at Golden Gate Park and at Humboldt Bay were both excellent examples of the Eastlake Style. The group of stations built at the end of the 1880's and on into the mid-1890's--Point Bonita, Point Reyes and the Southside Station were examples of the Colonial Revival accompanied by some Queen Anne elements. The gambrel roofed keeper and crew quarters at Point



4. U.S. Life-Saving Station, Golden Gate Park, San Francisco, California (Photo: San Francisco Maritime Museum, San Francisco).



5. Point Reyes Life-Saving Station, Point Reyes Beach, California (Photo: San Francisco Maritime Museum, San Francisco).



6. U.S. Coast Guard Rescue Station, Humboldt Bay, California
(Photo: U.S. Air Force). (KAIL 2016)

Reyes is a shingled residential scaled building which would be at home along any street of Berkeley or suburban San Francisco. The Arena Cove Station of 1906, and the new facility for the Point Reyes Station of Drakes Bay (1915), w Colonial Revival, while the rebuilt station of 1915 at Bolinas Bay was Colonial Revival modified by the then popular Craftsman (Arts and Crafts) mode. The culmination of the Colonial Revival style for lifeboat rescue stations on the California coast took place in the mid-1930's at the new station at Point Arguello, and the rebuilding of the Humboldt Bay Station. Each of these stations suggested that a bit of Colonial New England had been uprooted and transplanted to the West coast.

The Point Arguello, California,
Lifeboat Rescue Station and Lookout Tower

Prior to the construction of the Point Arguello Life-Saving Station, none had been built along the extensive coastline from San Francisco south to San Diego. The reason for the lack of rescue stations along this section of the coast was due to a variety of considerations, some of which were political, while others were related to the physical nature of the coastline, to the way in which urban centers developed along the coast, and to the patterns of coastal shipping. Other than Monterey Bay, no natural sheltered harbor exists between San Francisco Bay and San Diego Bay. Semi-open roadsteads such as those at Port San Luis Obispo and at Santa Barbara lacked natural well-sheltered harbors. None of the coastal communities between San Pedro Bay (Los Angeles) and San Francisco established themselves as important coastal-oriented cities during the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. Docks were frequently built up and down the Southern coast, and coastal traffic was substantial, but it never was as important as that of the Northern California coast. The principal shipping lanes between San Francisco, San Pedro (an artificially-constructed harbor) and San Diego were held far out from the coast. These lanes only approached the coast at Point Arguello/Point Conception where an abrupt turn was made so that the ships could move down the Santa Barbara Channel. Below Point Arguello/Point Conception ships usually traveled between the Channel Islands and the mainland.

The most dangerous area in the southern shipping routes was the Point Arguello/Point Conception region. Conditions at Point Arguello are characterized by rocky extensions protruding far out from the coast,





Location of U.S. Coast Guard Life-Saving and Lookout Tower, Point Arguello, California.

powerful ocean currents, high and frequently-shifting winds and seas plague by heavy fog which can roll in without warning. Point Arguello received its name from Captain George Vancouver in 1793. He wrote of the place, "Another high, steep rocky point...rising very abruptly in rugged craggy cliffs." He further noted that the coastline between Point Sal to the north and Point Arguello "...was destitute of wood, and nearly so of other vegetal production..." Seventy years later the writer H. Willis Baxley noted in his What I Saw on the West Coast of South and North America and of the Hawaiian Island (1865) "...and Point Arguella (sic) was passed at about five P.M., after which a low, sandy, and barren-looking shore at a four miles' distance was coasted for thirty-five miles to Point San Luis Obispo."

The need for a lighthouse at Point Conception was recognized very early; and in 1855 one constructed of stone was built on the high cliffs. Though as Stanley Wood wrote, Point Arguello "...better than Point Conception marks the meeting-point of ocean and channel," (Over the Range to the Golden Gate, 1908). A lighthouse was not built at that point until 1901. In 1868 39.70 acres at the Point were granted to the Federal Government for the construction of a lighthouse, but no action was taken by the government. The site was returned to the owners of the ranch who had donated the land. Again in 1878, the site was deeded to the Federal Government, though no action was taken at this time to build a lighthouse. Ten years later the Federal Lighthouse Board pressed for construction of a lighthouse, but funds were not made available until 1900. The first lighthouse structure at the Point was of stone and it used kerosene oil lamps. In 1925, the small town of Arlight was established nearby. Arlight was more of a town in name than in fact, for it consisted of only a Post Office, a school, a blacksmith shop and a general store. By the early 1930's the town had really ceased

to exist and it was officially abandoned in 1935.

Between the years 1849 and 1933 there were nineteen major shipwrecks at or near Point Arguello. These were:

1849	April	- <u>SS Edith</u> ; beached in area of Point Arguello
1854	Sept. 20	- <u>SS Yankee Blade</u> ; aground off Point Arguello
1881		- <u>SS Julius R. Ray</u> ; lost off Point Conception
1886	May	- <u>SS Los Angeles</u> ; lost off Point Arguello
		- <u>Columbia</u> ; sank off Point Sal
1891		- <u>King James</u> ; caught fire, crew landed at Point Conception
1893	November	- <u>SS Gosford</u> ; caught fire, crew landed at Point Arguello
1905	June	- <u>SS Robert Sudden</u> ; lost between Surf and Santa Ynez River
1906		- <u>Shasta</u> ; lost off Point Conception
1909	January	- <u>SS Sybil Marston</u> ; sank south of Surf
1911	Feb. 7	- <u>SS Santa Rosa</u> ; aground off Point Pedernales
1917	June	- <u>McCullough</u> ; rammed and sunk by <u>SS Governor</u> ; north of Point Conception
1923	September	- <u>SS Cuba</u> ; aground off San Miguel Island
	Sept. 7	-Seven U.S. Navy destroyers; aground off Point Pedernales
1926		- <u>Solano</u> ; aground north of Surf
		- <u>Orwaiti</u> ; aground off Point Sal
1931	May 30	- <u>SS Harvard</u> ; aground off Point Arguello
1933	May 28	- <u>SS Nippon Maru</u> ; aground off Point Pedernales
		- <u>Chehalis</u> ; aground at Cojo after collision with <u>J.D. Stetson</u>

The first of these recorded wrecks, that in 1849 of the SS Edith, may have been deliberate on the part of the crew so that they could join the gold rush. The shipwrecks which followed were all accidents due to faulty

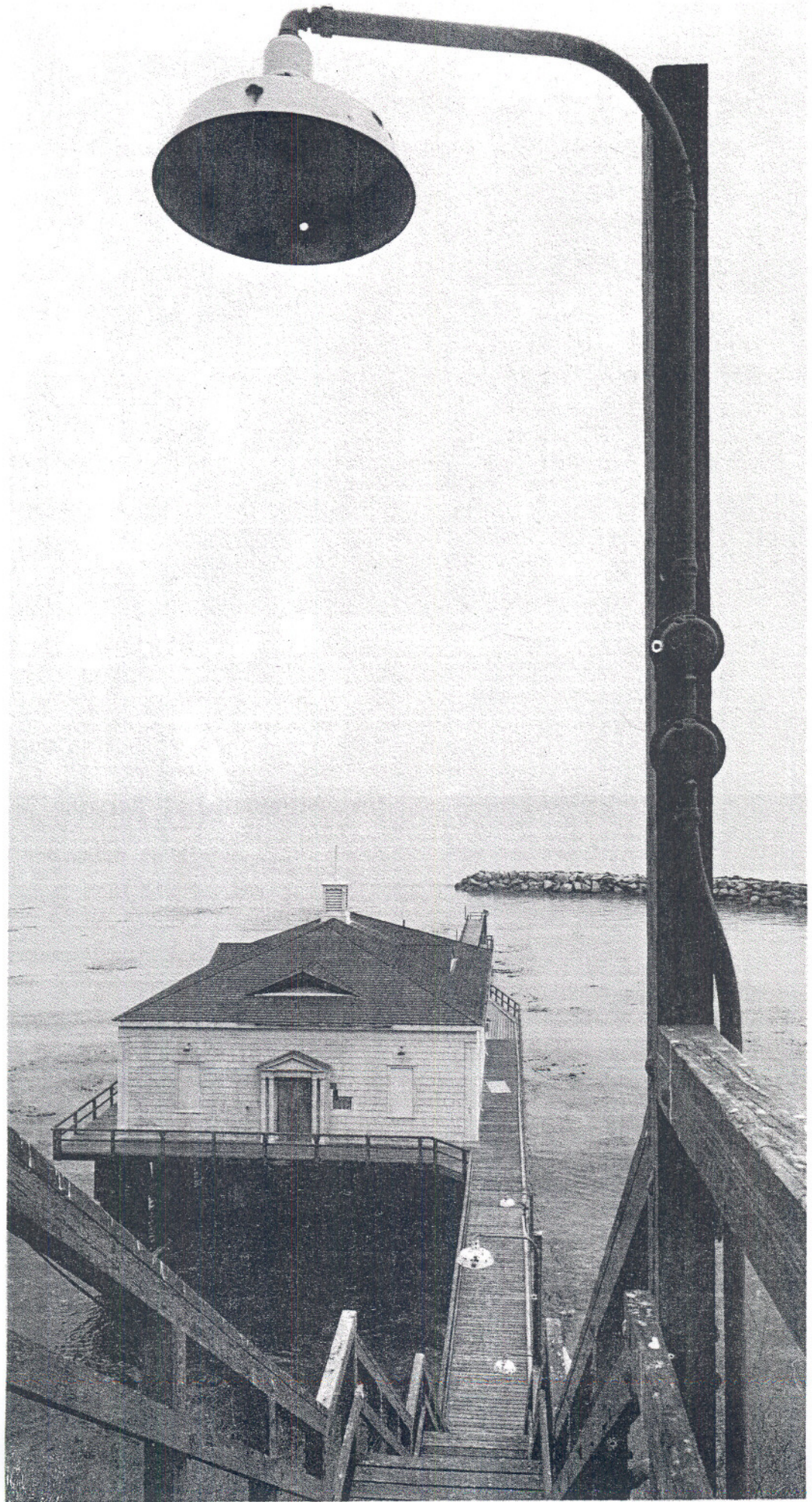
navigation, which took place either in storms or in the dense fog that often enshrouds the Point. Most of the wrecks actually occurred on the rocks that project out from the coast, although several of the disasters involved in the collision of ships. The most dramatic of the wrecks at the Point was that of four U.S. Navy destroyers which steamed head-on into the rocky shoreline on the foggy night of September 9, 1923. These destroyers were part of a squadron of seven, southbound from San Francisco. Some miles north of Point Arguello the squadron encountered heavy fog, and unknowingly was thirty miles off course. The flagship Delphy changed course for what was thought to be the Santa Barbara Channel, but turned out to be the rocky coast three miles north of the Point. The Delphy struck the shore at Saddle Rock at a speed of twenty knots, and the destroyers following in formation (the S.P. Lee, Young, Nicholas, Woodbury, Chauncey and Fuller) were in turn grounded. Twenty-two sailors lost their lives in what was one of the worst U.S. Navy disasters between the First and Second World Wars.

Although rescue equipment, including surfboats, were added to the Point Conception lighthouse previous to this disaster, the cliff-lined shore and high surf of the Pacific at Point Conception limited their use. Taking into account the long history of major wrecks in and around Point Arguello and Point Conception, it is surprising that no lifeboat rescue stations were established before the mid-1930's. An article, "Naval Station Funds Ready," published in the July 11, 1935, Santa Barbara Morning Press, mentions that the station had been "...long-planned," which would probably indicate that consideration had been given to the establishment of a facility near Point Arguello as early as the late 1920's.

The first concrete evidence of action for establishing a rescue station at Point Arguello was a survey "... of the Proposed Site," dated August 16,



7. U.S. Coast Guard Rescue Station and Lookout, Point Arguello, California. View down the wood stairway to Dock and Boathouse (Photo: Marvin Rand).



8. U.S. Coast Guard Rescue Station and Lookout, Point Arguello, California. Boathouse, Dock and Launching Ramp, view from above looking east (Photo: Marvin Rand).

The 4.5-acre parcel upon which the facility was to be built was subsequently purchased for \$5,000 from the Sudden Ranch on July 22, 1935. An examination of the coastal map of this region indicates that the selected site, which lay approximately southeast of Point Arguello, was the only feasible place to locate a rescue facility. The shore at this point turns briefly northward, then resumes an eastward extension; therefore, because of this curvature an open cove was provided. This site was near enough to Rocky Point, Point Arguello and Point Pedernales that rescue boats could reach a distressed vessel in reasonable time.

The site selected for the rescue facility was located on a section of the Santa Barbara coast that even today conveys the impression of an unpopulated, pastoral, Arcadian world. From Point Arguello east to approximately Ventura, the California coast is characterized by a narrow sloping bench which usually ends abruptly in a cliff at the coast. North of the rising bench are the Santa Ynez mountains. The bench itself is cut, usually quite deeply, by both large and small seasonal streams. While a few native as well as non-native trees are to be found in these arroyos and canyons, the lower mountain slope and the bench itself--the Coastal Sage Zone--are covered with grass and low vegetation. The utilization of the land for cattle grazing has appreciably increased the area covered with grass. Today, in 1980, a few stands of Monterey Cypress remain in the general area of the Point Arguello rescue facility. These stands were planted as windbreaks to protect the few ranch outbuildings originally situated in the area. In certain sections the beach is quite wide; in other cases it is almost nonexistent. Dramatic rock outcroppings jut into the water just off the coast from Jalama Beach (southeast of the rescue facility) northward past Point Pedernales.



9. U.S. Coast Guard Rescue Station and Lookout, Point Arguello, California. View of outer narrow dock, with the Marine Railroad and Launching Ramp to the right (Photo: Marvin Rand).



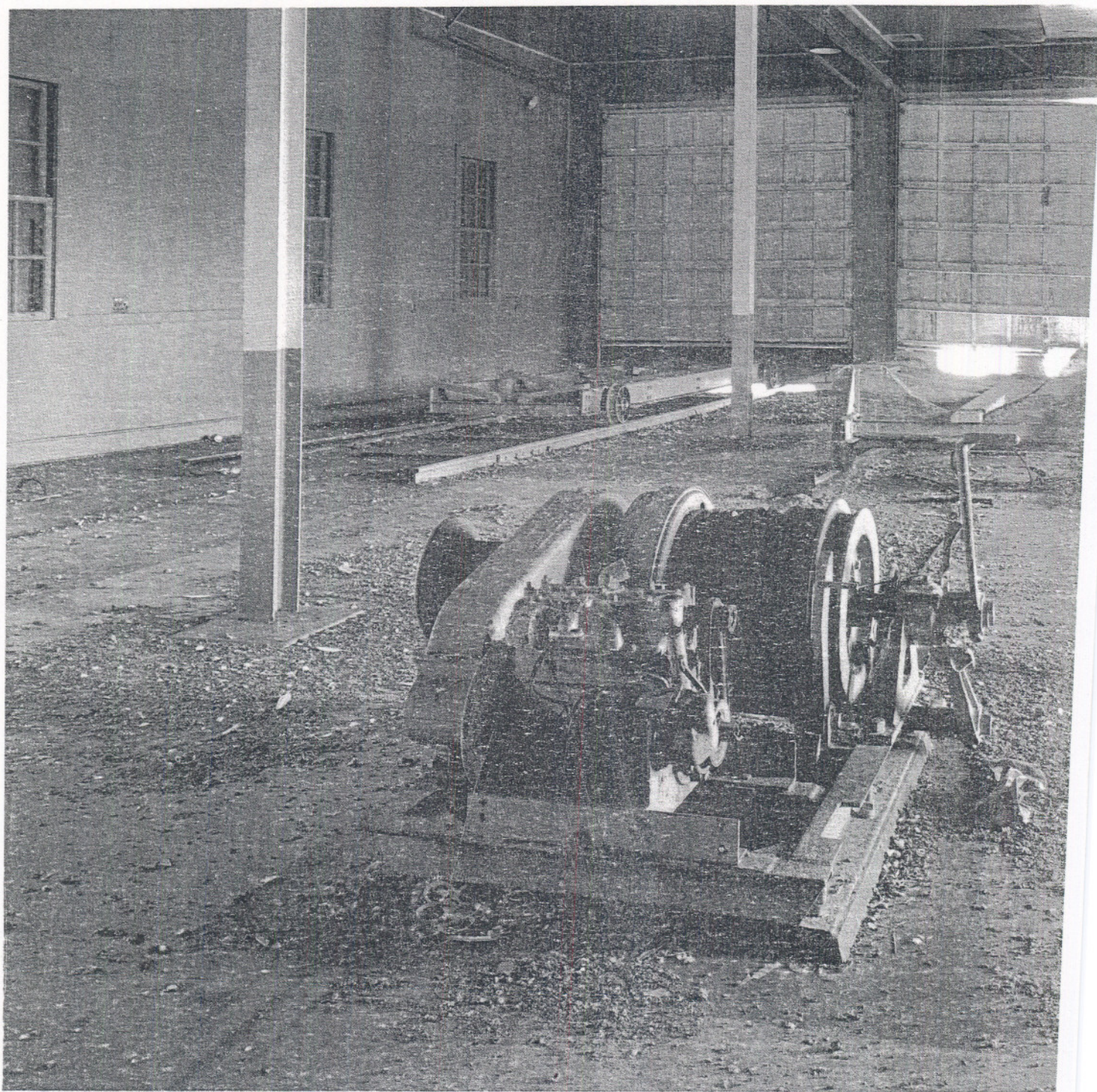
The land upon which the rescue station was built provides a fascinating glimpse into the history of California. The Point itself was mapped in 1793 by the Englishman, Captain George Vancouver. It was he who named the Point in honor of Jose Dario Arguello, a Spanish military officer stationed at Monterey. In 1787, before Vancouver had mapped the coastline, Point Arguello and the adjacent lands had been assigned by the Spanish Crown to La Purisima Mission. After the breakup of the Missions, the Point was included in the 24,992-acre Rancho Punta de la Concepcion which was granted to Anastacio Carrillo. In the 1850's, the Point was included in a number of major land transactions by individuals whose names become prominent in California history--Gaspar Orena, Isaac J. Sparks, Thomas B. Dibblee and Colonel W.W. Hollister. At this time the Rancho Punto de la Concepcion was divided, and Point Arguello was included in the Rancho la Espada.

On two occasions, in 1868 and 1878, Colonel W.W. Hollister and Thomas and Albert Dibblee offered the Point to the Federal Government for the site of a lighthouse. The second of these offers was accepted, although a lighthouse was not built until 1901. The sole economic activity of this section of the coast was that of cattle raising, a use which has in part continued to the present. In order to facilitate the shipping of cattle and the receiving of goods, Hollister and Dibblees' built a wharf in 1879 which was located three and three quarters of a mile east of Point Arguello. A second wharf was apparently built about the same time at Point Arguello itself. Neither of these wharves was very feasible, for the sea was generally too rough for the ships to dock at them.

In 1883 Robert Sudden, who had been associated with Colonel W.W. Hollister and Thomas and Albert Dibblee in the wharf project, purchased a portion of the Rancho la Espada. Sudden (and then later Sudden Estate Co.)



11. U.S. Coast Guard Rescue Station and Lookout, Point Arguello, California. Marine Railroad, Dock and Launching Ramp; note end of the Breakwater to the upper left (Photo: Marvin Rand).



12. U.S. Coast Guard Rescue Station and Lookout, Point Arguello, California. Interior to the Boathouse with small launching winch and motor and one Launching Railroad Car in center of photograph (Photo: Marvin Rand).

continued to own this extensive acreage along the coast until it was purchased and added to Vandenberg Air Force Base in 1966. The pastoral remoteness of the land was occasionally interrupted. The coastal section of the Southern Pacific Railroad line was built through the Sudden Ranch between 1887 and 1900. The lighthouse at the Point was commissioned on February 22, 1901, and in 1924 oil exploration began on the ranch. In 1925, the almost-town of Arlight was established, and on July 22, 1935, the Sudden Ranch Company sold two parcels of subdivided Lot 1, Rancho la Espada, to the United States Government for a U.S. Coast Guard lifeboat station and lookout tower.

The nature of the site selected for the lifeboat rescue station at Point Arguello was such that the boathouse and dock were entirely separated from the Headquarters/Barracks building and other structures which were constructed on the flat shelf of land, sixty feet above the beach. The original 1935 plan for the facility consisted of a boathouse, dock and launching ramp located in the cove, which was partially protected by an extensive artificially constructed breakwater. On the flat shelf above were to be six buildings which included a Headquarters/Barracks building, an Officer's Quarters, a Lookout Tower and Watch Tower, a Flag Tower, a Service Garage Building and a Pump House.

Working drawings for all of the buildings at Point Arguello were prepared at the United States Coast Guard Headquarters in Washington, D.C., between the years 1935 and 1938. Regrettably, we know little about the individual architects and engineers who participated in the design of these and other Coast Guard buildings. A look at the drawings prepared for the new 1936 Headquarters/Barracks/Boathouse Building for the Rescue Station at Humboldt Bay reveals that the drawings are initialed by the same

individuals who prepared the drawings for the Point Arguello buildings. A comparison of the buildings at the two facilities shows that while they are both examples of the Colonial Revival, and they both share a number of similar details, the buildings at each site were in no way repeated duplicates. Each set of buildings was specifically designed as a response to the needs of two very different locations.

The U.S. Coast Guard records at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., and the local newspapers provide us with a general picture of how construction proceeded at the Point Arguello Rescue Station between 1935 and 1941. Both the Santa Barbara Morning Press and the Lompoc Record carried stories on July 11th and 12th of 1935 reporting that \$103,205 had been approved by the Works Allocation Board in Washington, D.C., for the construction of the Point Arguello lifeboat facility. On the 26th of November, 1935, a request for bids was sent to fifteen northern and southern California construction firms. They were asked to bid on the plans and specifications which were sent to them for the two-and-a-half-story and basement Headquarters/Barracks Building and a story-and-a-half garage. A second request for bids was sent out sometime that November for the drilling of a deep well and the construction of a water system. Another problem to be overcome for the projected facility was the need for a twenty-mile, all-weather road, since the existing ranch road was impassable during parts of the winter months.

An announcement of the award for bid for the Headquarters/Barracks Building and Garage Building was published in the Lompoc Record on December 20, 1935. The contract for construction was awarded to the Everett Building Company of Lompoc, a firm which does not seem to have been among those originally solicited. The allocation of the project was



15. U.S. Coast Guard Rescue Station and Lookout, Point Arguello, California. Headquarters/ Barracks Building, Crew's Quarters on the second floor; note the individual closets per each of the surfmen (Photo: Marvin Rand).

\$42,643 and a contract was signed February 3, 1936. It was announced that the employees of the Everett Company would receive much of their material via the nearby Southern Pacific Railroad, and that they would set up their tents and camp at the site.

The Everett firm commenced work on the project on February 21, 1936. The Lompoc Record published several stories on the construction of the Headquarters/Barracks Building and Garage in the months that followed. On November 27th, 1936, the Lompoc Record announced that the "Coast Guard Station Nears Completion; Crew is Due." On December 25, 1936, an announcement was made in the paper that the Point Arguello Rescue Station was "officially opened."

At the same time that construction was proceeding with the Headquarters/Barracks Building and Garage Building, a contract was let on March 12, 1936, to Lyon Brothers of Los Angeles to dig the much needed deep water well. Some time in 1936, before the station opened, the sixty-foot-high open metal work flag tower was built. The question of the need for an all-weather road continued to be debated, primarily because the County of Santa Barbara, rather than the Federal Government, would have to pay the cost of its construction. The Lompoc Record of January 8, 1937, noted that the "County to Start Surf-Honda Road", the paved road to the Rescue Station and the Lighthouse was finally opened on October 18, 1940, and the remains of the old wooden board road were removed.

The completion of the main Headquarters/Barracks Building made it possible to place the facility in operation, even though the station did not yet possess a lookout tower, nor the needed Boathouse, Dock and Launching Ramp. On December 17, 1936, Lt. Bendict R. Mess, one junior officer and seven surfmen were officially assigned to the Station. Previous

to their arrival a thirty-eight-foot lifeboat and truck trailer had been sent down from San Francisco. This boat was the sole rescue craft at the station until a dory was added in 1937. The only method for launching the thirty-eight-foot lifeboat was by backing the trailer into the water, and then through a winch on the truck pulling it into or out of the water. The official Logs reveal very little about what went on at the station. The entries tend to be terse and minimally factual--such as the first entry of December 17, 1936, which simply notes, "Inspected station and garage buildings and apparatus." Mention was continuously made of training exercises, and occasional mention is made of one or another of the crew being assigned to help with the continuing construction of the facility.

The next addition to the Station was the Lookout and Watch Tower which was built in 1937, and became operational on the 11th of March, 1938. It was constructed by Fred J. Early, Jr., of San Francisco and its metal base was prefabricated in Pennsylvania by the Bethlehem Steel Company. Contemporaneous with the Tower was the much more complex construction of the Boathouse and Dock with its Launching Platform and Marine Railway. Indicative of the problem of obtaining competent contractors for difficult structures of this sort situated in remote areas was the fact that a request for bids was sent out to a selected list of twenty-nine principal California contractors, and out of this group only two bids were received (and we should remember that this was during the Great Depression of the 1930's). The bid of \$105,000 by Shannahan Brothers of Los Angeles was accepted and construction started in late August, 1937. A construction crew of fifteen to twenty-five men first had to build the road from the upper shelf of land (where the Headquarters/Barracks Building was situated) to the bench, before work could begin on the dock and launchway. The fact

that the Breakwater had not yet been built made the construction of the dock, launchway, Boathouse and Marine Railroad difficult. We are uncertain of the precise date of completion, but it would appear that these structures were finished in late March, 1938: for the Lompoc Record noted on February 18, 1938, that the launchway would be completed "...late next month."

When the Boathouse was completed two gasoline driven winches and one gasoline driven dynamo to generate electricity were installed. Three new boats were purchased to replace those which had been in use since 1936. These now were a thirty-eight-foot motor lifeboat, a twenty-five-foot motor surfboat, and a twenty-five-foot surfboat. The Boathouse also provided for a metal Life Car, but there is no indication that this piece of rescue equipment was even brought to the station. When the Boathouse became operational there were thirteen surfmen at the Station under the command of Lt. William E. Peterson. The Lompoc Record mentions the difficulty encountered in launching boats from the Boathouse before the Breakwater was finished, but no mention of this problem was made in the Station's Log.

The most difficult to build of the new structures at the Point Arguello Station was the Breakwater which would make the use of the launching ramp and Marine Railroad feasible during storms and high seas. Although mention was made at the time of the Breakwater formed of rocks, the first scheme was for a "Construction of Cellular Type Steel Sheets Pile Breakwater;" the plans and specifications for which were published on June 16, 1936, under the signature of P. Julian Latham, Senior Civil Engineer, U.S. Coast Guard. The request for bids went out on July 8, 1936, but the Breakwater plans were recalled in October, 1936. It would appear that the proposed steel platepile Breakwater was too expensive and too difficult to construct in the rough waters off the Station. The Lompoc Record wrote that the original scheme was withdrawn

because of the "...failure to obtain bids for fitted one-ton rocks protected by steel pilings." The second design for the Breakwater was of conventional rock fill design. It would appear that bids were sought on the second Breakwater in July, 1938. Funds, to the sum of \$125,000 were to be provided this time by the P.W.A. (The Public Works Administration). Only two bids were received for the project: one from Shannahan Brothers of Huntington Park for \$186,620; the other from Rohl-Connelly Company of Los Angeles. The Rohl-Connelly bid of \$165,000 was officially accepted on August 11, 1938. In mid-October, the contractor started work on the site with a fifteen-man work crew and one-ton-plus granite rocks for the Breakwater were being shipped by boat from the Los Angeles area. The four-hundred-and-fifty-foot L-shaped Breakwater was completed on February 10, 1939, and the Coast Guard took official custody on March 21, 1939.

Before 1940 other improvements were made at the Station. A small shingle clad Water Treatment Building with a 10,000 gallon tank was added, either in 1938 or 1939. A substantial wood fence and a metal cattle guard were built in 1938 to keep the range cattle off the site. From the beginning it was assumed that a single story double house would be built to accommodate two officers. Plans were proposed for this "Cottage" and it was put out for bid on May 19, 1937. A single bid was received and this was rejected as being too high. For some reason no further attempts appear to have been made either to scale down the "Cottage" or to seek a second round of bids. Originally it was planned that the Station would generate its own electricity, and three separate dynamo powerplants were brought to the facility in 1937. One was placed in the Boathouse, one in the Headquarters/Barracks Building, and one was supposed to have been placed in the projected officer's "Cottage." The Logs and other records of the Station indicate

that these gasoline powered units were not reliable. In 1939, an electric power line was brought to the Station.

The buildings at the Point Arguello Station borrowed their architectural imagery from the Colonial Revival. All of the buildings, including the small Lookout Tower and Watch House, and the Water Treatment Building were sheathed in white painted wood shingles. Traditional twelve light sash windows, together with workable dark green painted wood shutters added the final Colonial touch. Smaller wood details on the Headquarters/Barracks Building, the Boathouse and the Garage Building carried out the same theme--balustraded single story porch with wood columns and piers at the front of the Headquarters/Barracks Building; dormers with round-headed windows in the gabled roofs, engaged piers at the corners of the buildings, etc. Internally all of the buildings were bare and simple, but again such features as the twelve lighted casement windows and the six paneled doors conveyed a sense of the early eighteenth century New England architecture.

In regard to engineering the Boathouse and its Launching Ramp provides an important chapter in the history of marine railroads. Its configuration of three pairs of tracks which converge, but remain separate, was a more highly developed layout than the double track system employed at the contemporaneous Humboldt Bay Station. The design of the marine railway and the success of the design of the Breakwater places the Point Arguello Station in the forefront of coastal naval architecture.

The Colonial Revival style utilized in the design of the buildings at the Point Arguello Station comprises a fascinating architectural image. Though Colonial Revival architecture was present in California from the late 1880's to the present, it was never so prevalent on the West coast as it was in the East, Midwest or South. One can suggest a variety of reasons which

encouraged the U.S. Coast Guard to use this particular Period revival style. Historically, the late 18th and early 19th Century Colonial styles (ranging from the Pre-Georgian to the Federal styles) were closely associated with New England, and symbolically, as we have already mentioned, New England in turn suggested an involvement with the sea, and with rigorous puritanism. The forthright plainness of white-painted shingles has a distinct association with that of the ship and life aboard the ship. An additional advantage in maintaining a repeated architectural image regardless of geographic locale was that we would be aware that it was naval and Federal.

The specific use of Colonial Revival forms of the 1920's for a complex built in the 1930's, plus the implied suggestion that this is an upper-middle-class country estate, provides two other comments on the practice of architecture during these decades. First, it indicates a tendency for in-house governmental architecture to generally lag behind whatever happens to be the latest architectural vogue. Second, it demonstrates the circumscribed limitations of imagery which always face a designer. The small scale of a facility such as that at Point Arguello (plus other considerations: economic, etc.) meant that its imagery would most logically be derived from a domestic source. And if it was to be domestic, if it was to be situated in the open country, the most logical source would be that of a country estate. There are of course ironies involved; the employment of the image of an upper-middle-class country estate which by implication characterizes the wealthy laissez-faire world of the twenties, being used for a quasi-military installation, built during the Great Depression of the 1930's, creates a fascinating series of contradictions.

From December 17, 1936, until December 31, 1941, the Point Arguello Station was administered by a succession of four officers. These were

Benedict R. Mess, William E. Peterson, Herbert Wilbur and W.L. Scanborough (sp.?). The complement of station personnel varied between nine and seventeen men. The Logs themselves reveal that activities of the station were generally quiet between 1936 and 1941. The two most important incidents were the sinking of the SS Long Eagle after it collided with the USS Crosby off Point Arguello in April, 1941, and the grounding of SS Iowan at Government Point on June 13, 1941. Boats from the Point Arguello Station were sent out in both of these instances, though there is no evidence that they actively rescued anyone. In the case of the grounding of the SS Iowan, the Santa Barbara News Press on June 13, 1941, reported that "...the Coast Guard Cutter Perseus and motor launches from Point Arguello Coast Guard Station were standing by." The Station's Logs do not reveal any actual rescue performed by the lifeboats of the station, between 1936 and 1942. But this five year period is too brief a time to form a judgment as to whether it really was advantageous to have built the facility. If it had come into existence at an earlier period of time it might well have saved the lives of mariners involved in the numerous wrecks which had occurred in and around the Point.

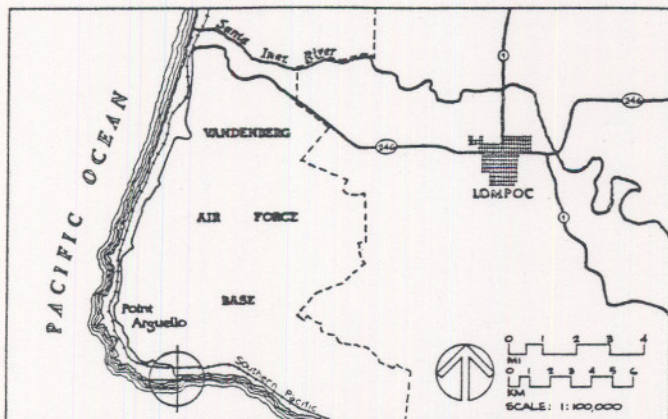
With the entrance of the United States into the Second World War on December 7, 1941, the situation drastically changed for the Point Arguello Station. On December 21, 1941, a Japanese submarine attacked the cargo ship Emidio off of Point Arguello, but there is no mention that any boats were dispatched from the Point Arguello Station. In the last month of normal operation, on December 26, 1941, Lt. W.L. Scanborough (sp.), the Commanding Officer, reported that the "...1st and 3rd Platoons of Company M-160 Infantry moved in on the Reservation." And the last entry in the Station's Log book notes that there were now sixteen Coast Guard personnel

at the Station, and thirty-four enlisted men of the U.S. Army.

During the Second World War several buildings were added to the station to accommodate coastal military operations between 1943-1944. These included four single story cottages, a long barracks building, a refrigerator building, kennels, a second Garage building and several smaller structures. With the exception of the Refrigeration Building, all of these World War II buildings were removed after 1945. Also removed in the immediate Post World War II years were the Lookout Tower and Watch House and the 10,000 gallon water tank. After the Station was officially disestablished in 1952, a one-hundred-and-thirty-foot open metal work Tower was added either late in 1955 or early in 1956. And at about the same time a helicopter pad was constructed.

The post-1941 history of the Point Arguello Station illustrates the gradual loss of its lifeboat rescue activities. The Coast Guard continued to operate the Station during the Second World War, though its use was more that of Coastal Defense base as part of nearby Camp Cooke than a rescue station. On September 8, 1952, the Point Arguello Station was officially disestablished; and on February 10, 1958, the Station was transferred to the U.S. Navy. In May of 1958, South Camp Cooke, which included the former Coast Guard Station at Point Arguello, was commissioned as the Naval Missile Facility, Point Arguello. On July 1, 1964, the Naval Missile Facility at Point Arguello was transferred to the U.S. Air Force. Two years later Vanderberg Air Force Base acquired the Sudden Ranch from the Sudden Estate Company. From this point on, the buildings comprising the former station were abandoned, and they currently remain unused.

U.S. COAST GUARD RESCUE STATION POINT ARGUELLO, CALIFORNIA



SITE LOCATION MAP

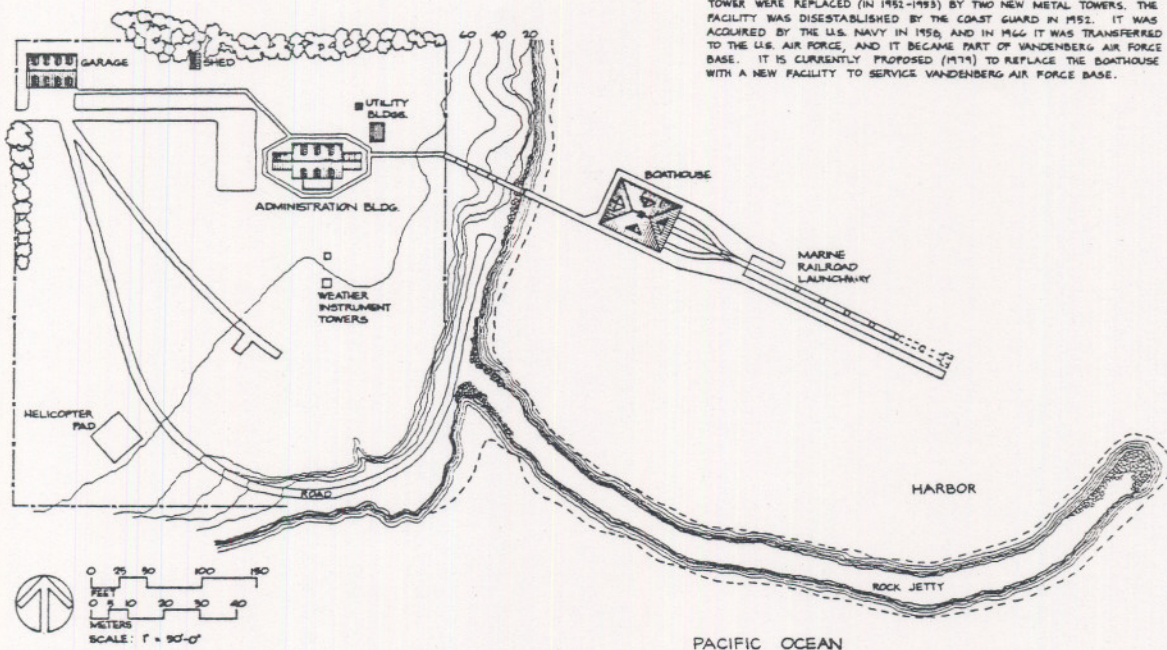
BASED ON USGS 7.5 MIN. SERIES 1959, POINT ARGUELLO, SURF, TRANQUILLON MTN. QUADRANGLES. UTM REFERENCE:

THE U.S. COAST GUARD RESCUE STATION AND LOOKOUT TOWER AT POINT ARGUELLO, CALIFORNIA, WAS ESTABLISHED ON DECEMBER 17, 1936, AND CEASED NORMAL OPERATIONS ON DECEMBER 31, 1941. THE SITE WAS PURCHASED BY THE COAST GUARD ON JULY 22, 1935, AND IT REMAINED UNDER THEIR JURISDICTION UNTIL FEBRUARY 10, 1958, WHEN IT WAS TRANSFERRED TO THE U.S. NAVY. THIS SITE, ON AN OPEN COVE APPROXIMATELY TWO MILES SOUTH OF THE POINT ARGUELLO LIGHTHOUSE, WAS SELECTED AS A LOCATION FOR A RESCUE STATION BECAUSE OF THE LONG HISTORY OF NAVAL DISASTERS WHICH HAVE OCCURRED ON THIS SECTION OF THE CALIFORNIA COAST.

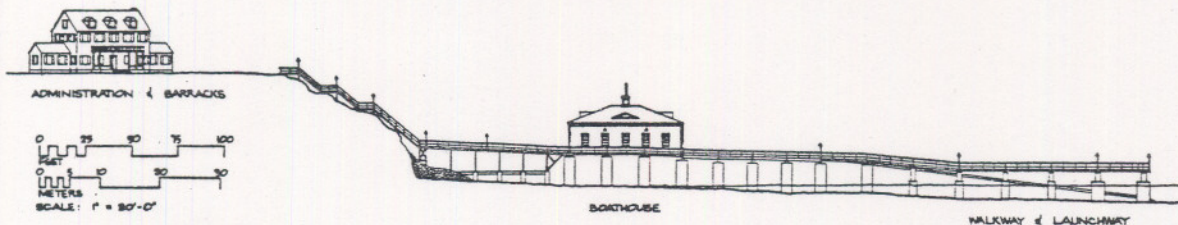
BETWEEN THE YEARS OF 1936 AND 1941 THE COAST GUARD CONSTRUCTED ON THE SITE AN ADMINISTRATION AND BARRACKS BLDG. (1936), A GARAGE BLDG. (1936), A SMALL WATER TREATMENT BLDG. (1936), A FLAG TOWER (1936), A LOOKOUT TOWER (1937), A GRANITE ROCK BREAKWATER (1939), AND A DOCK, MARINE RAILWAY AND BOATHOUSE (1937). ALL OF THESE STRUCTURES WERE DESIGNED BY THE CIVIL ENGINEERING OFFICE OF THE COAST GUARD IN WASHINGTON, D.C. AND THEY WERE BUILT ON CONTRACT BY PRIVATE CALIFORNIA CONSTRUCTION FIRMS. THE ARCHITECTURAL IMAGERY EVOKED WAS THAT OF THE RESIDENTIAL COLONIAL REVIVAL, A STYLE ALMOST UNIVERSALLY EMPLOYED (1900-1940) BY THE COAST GUARD FOR ITS MANY LAND FACILITIES.

WHEN ACTIVATED IN 1936 THE FACILITY WAS MANNED BY TWO OFFICERS AND SEVEN SURPHEN; WHEN IT CEASED ITS NORMAL OPERATION ON DECEMBER 31, 1941, THERE WERE ONE OFFICER AND FIFTEEN ENLISTED PERSONNEL. THE TWO PRINCIPLE ACTIVITIES OF THE FACILITY CENTERED ON THREE RESCUE BOATS SHELTERED IN THE BOATHOUSE AND THE MANNING OF THE FLAG TOWER AND THE LOOKOUT TOWER. THE THREE RESCUE BOATS COULD BE QUICKLY LAUNCHED ON A MARINE RAILROAD WHICH EXTENDED FROM THE BOATHOUSE TO THE HARBOR. DURING ITS BRIEF SIX YEAR PERIOD OF EXISTENCE THE FACILITY PARTICIPATED ON ONLY TWO OCCASIONS IN RESCUE OPERATIONS.

WITH THE ACTIVATING OF NEARBY CAMP COOKE ON OCTOBER 3, 1941, THE FACILITY WAS PARTIALLY OCCUPIED BY MILITARY PERSONNEL. BY THE END OF 1944 A NUMBER OF ADDITIONAL TEMPORARY BUILDINGS HAD BEEN ADDED TO THE SITE. AFTER 1945 THE SIGNAL TOWER AND THE LOOKOUT TOWER WERE REPLACED (IN 1952-1953) BY TWO NEW METAL TOWERS. THE FACILITY WAS DISESTABLISHED BY THE COAST GUARD IN 1952. IT WAS ACQUIRED BY THE U.S. NAVY IN 1958, AND IN 1966 IT WAS TRANSFERRED TO THE U.S. AIR FORCE, AND IT BECAME PART OF VANDENBERG AIR FORCE BASE. IT IS CURRENTLY PROPOSED (1971) TO REPLACE THE BOATHOUSE WITH A NEW FACILITY TO SERVICE VANDENBERG AIR FORCE BASE.



SITE PLAN



SITE SECTION

TEXT: D. GIBBARD
DRAWING: R. JOHNSON, A. BORISO 1980

U. S. COAST GUARD RESCUE STATION; POINT ARGUELLO, CALIFORNIA 1936-40
POINT ARGUELLO AT VANDENBERG AIR FORCE BASE

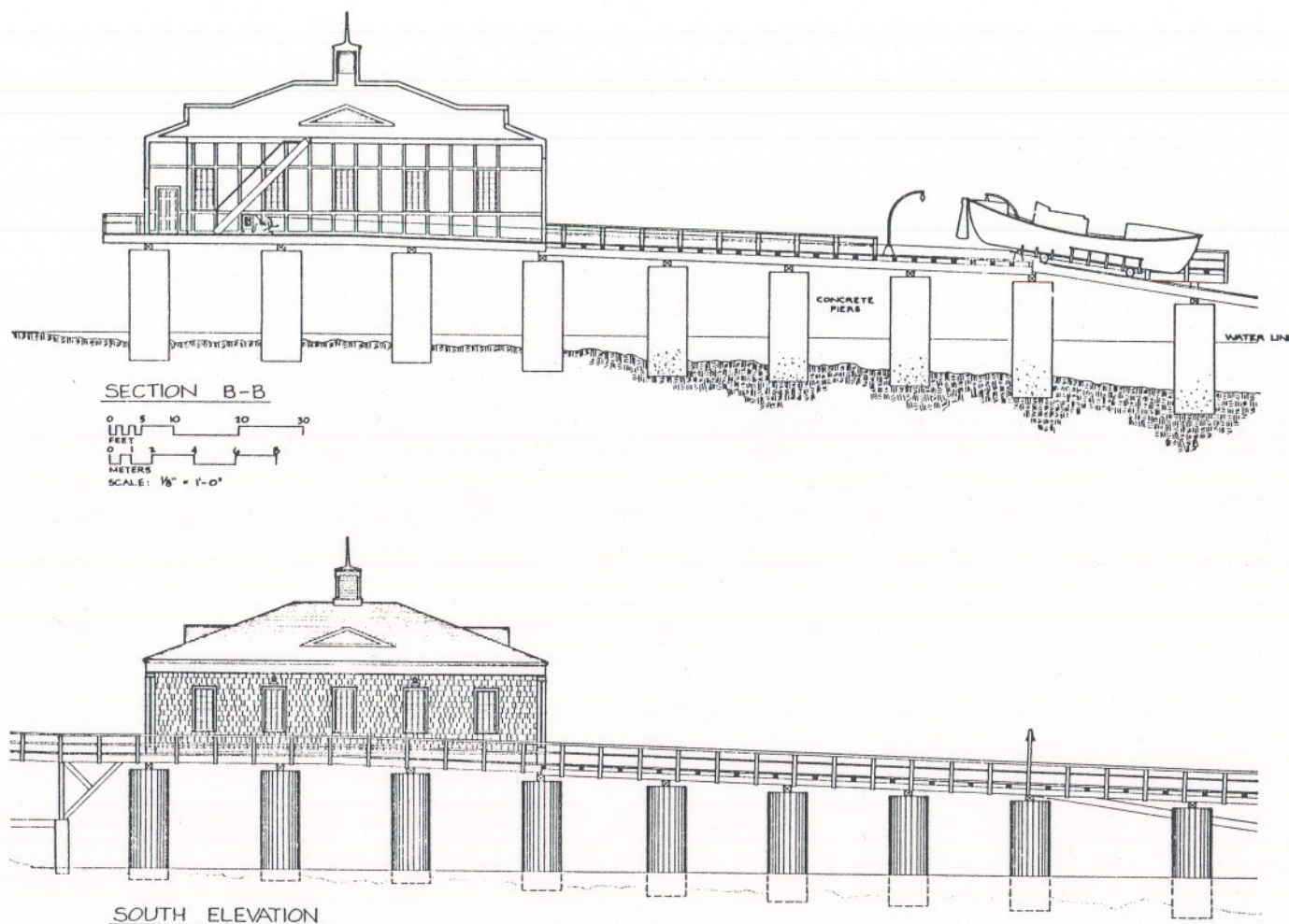
LOMPOC

COUNTY OF SANTA BARBARA

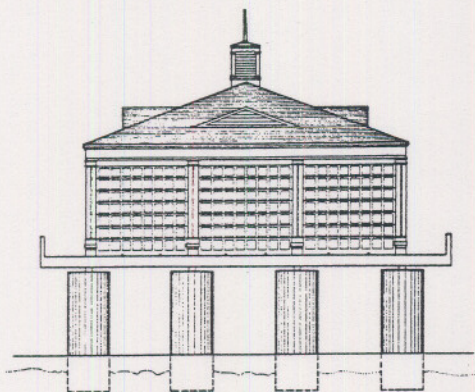
CALIFORNIA

SHEET
1 OF 3

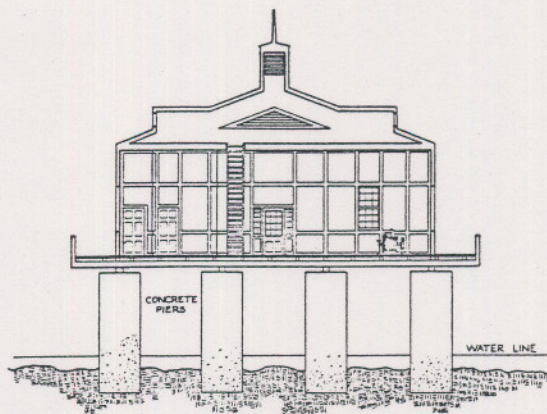
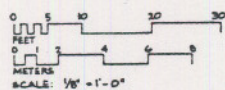
16. Location, Site Plan and Site Section. U.S. Coast Guard Rescue Station and Lookout Tower, Point Arguello, California (HAER Drawing, 1979-80).



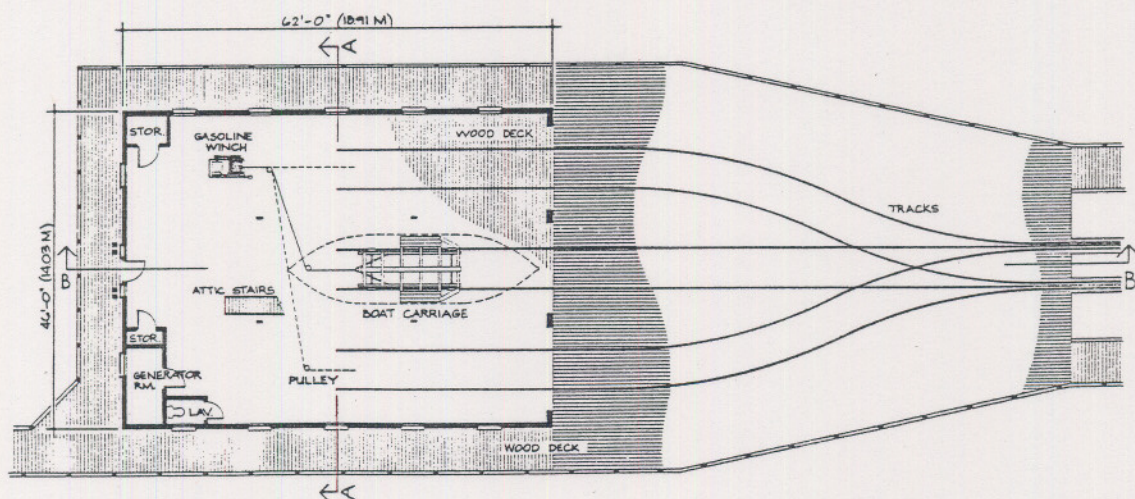
17. South Elevation and Section of the Boathouse, U.S. Coast Guard Rescue Station and Lookout Tower, Point Arguello, California, (HAER Drawing, 1979-80).



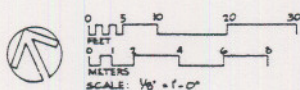
EAST ELEVATION



SECTION A-A



BOATHOUSE PLAN



DRAWING BY JOHNSON & BOWEN 1980

U. S. COAST GUARD RESCUE STATION, POINT ARGUELLO, CALIFORNIA 1936-40
POINT ARGUELLO AT VANDENBERG AIR FORCE BASE

LDMPQC

COUNTY OF SANTA BARBARA

CALIFORNIA

SHEET

2 OF 3

18. East Elevation, Section, Plan of Boathouse, U.S. Coast Guard Rescue Station and Lookout Tower, Point Arguello, California, (HAER Drawing, 1979-80).

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